

Masculine Imminence: The Male Gaze Vs Gazing At Men. Anthony Schrag

I am not a photographer. I trained as one once during my undergraduate degree, but I am no longer a photographer. I became something else as I grew older. Looking back at my images from this time, it is very *clear* that I am not a photographer: I am always leaping out of the frame; blurred in action; always living too much through my body, and not through my eye.

Clement Greenberg famously demanded that art should only be a visual medium; that “art should confine itself exclusively to what is given in visual experience, and make no reference to anything given in any other order of experience,”¹ and; that we should access art by “eyesight alone.”² While he was almost certainly speaking of painting, as an artist, however I have always found the emphasis on the ‘visual’ problematic

This has less to do the medium in which art generally appears, and more to do with the expectations of how we receive it. I call this the ‘Tyranny of Vision’ and it apparent in our language: we go to *see* a sculpture; We *watch* a play/film; We *look* at photographs. The eye is paramount and other process of interfacing — the body, the ear, the nose — are somehow of a lower order. These senses are somehow of a lesser *aesthetic* while the gaze grants the viewer with power

‘Looking’ however is a problem, especially men looking at women. Laura Mulvey’s 1975 essay, Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, developed the concept of ‘The Male Gaze’ to critique the formulations of power when men create images about/of women. Indeed, the Male Gaze and its critique are rife within the history of photography, and the frameworks of feminisms to challenge the patriarchal eye have always been relevant to the genre. However, contemporarily there is a growing awareness of the concepts of kyriarchy and intersectionality, which understand that systems of power are not simply based on essentialist notions of gender. The Female Gaze is also real; Patriarchs have feelings, too.

And this is where James Parker enters this text.

I am not suggesting that James is a tool of the patriarchy or he should suffer the same critique of those who aim to *control* through the lens. His images included here — to me — do not feel sort that *intend* to capture or oppress. A collection of wild horses, beat-up cars and the camaraderie of men and boys, the images emerged out of a journey Parker and two friends took in 2016, driving a 1972 Morris Minor from Edinburgh, Scotland to the outer reaches of Russia. A sort of primal journey of masculine discovery, and in this way, the images feel to be more about him than those in the frame. Indeed, Parker describes how the photographs emerged: “Over time I realised that I was focusing on situations that I recognised myself in... The project has this air of growing up, boyhood, vulnerability and finding your way.”

In 2015, I also undertook a ‘finding my own way’ journey in which I walked from the north of Scotland to the Venice Biennale: it was a similar lone journey of discovery into places that are strange and so I understand the urge to capture the things that are familiar; to find the recognisable parts of you in the other. I do want to gloss over the possible colonial nature of the images which emerge from Jame’s white, privileged male eye (or mine) capturing ‘others’ but I do not see that as part of his intention. Instead, the elements that Parker focuses upon are things in the process of becoming: skateboarders with defiant glances, wild horses, cars waiting with doors ajar, a road leading us away, male bodies that have not quite yet become men. The linking theme between them all is that hey all contain an immanence of manhood; of a ‘masculinity’ just emerging. This is not the gaze of someone looking *at*, but someone looking *with*.

Researching Parker, I discover he is 26. He was born in 1991, when I was 16 — at my own edge of manhood — and I can’t help but to read a cyclical connection between him and I: He took these

¹ C.) Forum Lectures. Washington, D. C.: Voice of America.

² C. Greenberg. (1993) ‘Sculpture in our time,’ in J. O’Brian (ed.) 1993 C. Greenberg, *Collected Essays and Criticism*, Volume 4. Chicago. The University of Chicago Press. p. 70.

photographs on a long journey when he was 25, at that 'peak' of manhood, and he is looking back at those difficult times when our muscles were just forming, when our wildness was as uncontrollable as those galloping horses and as defiant and indefatigable as gangs of boys on the bikes. Comparatively, when I went on my own long journey I was just turning 40, feeling the slow slide out of that 'peak masculinity' into the softness of middle-aged man. This the entry from the first day of my 2638 km walk:

"As we turn away from the town and south, down the hill, Clyde, the son of a friend, walks in front of me, down a path in a green and growing eld. At some point he begins to run – fast and energetic and alive and vital: He is a river suddenly in the wrong place – downhill, rushing, tracing the furrow, gracing and pulsating with the force of life. He is so full of youth and possibilities, on the edge of life and manhood and everything... and I feel suddenly very, very fragile and very old. I turn to my friend and say: *This is the image I will remember I will return to for the rest of this journey.*"

Since that time, I have returned to that image often, though it is not an image in the sense of a captured, still photograph. It is not a memory of the eye. Rather, it is an image of the 'body'; of remembering the wild liberating power of having a 16 year old's energy. I have similar sensation encountering James' images: they remind me of my own masculinity's emergence; of a corporal potentiality; of wild horses and times when doors for cars lay open, aching with possibility. In this sense, I do not consider James' photographs as 'visual' but rather as memories of becoming physical.

I don't want to suggest there is an essentialist notion of 'masculinity'; that all men experience masculinity in the same way: No - that would be a patriarchal and oppressive way to look upon our gender in ways that do not incorporate intersectionality. Only, it is merely my experience of looking towards James Parker's images as someone who lives through my body, instead of my eyes. They remind me of why I am not a photographer in the best possible way; that images are not always something to look at, but something to be remembered through the body.

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